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Review Article written by Dr Valerie O'Brien for *International Social Work*, Vol 42 (2)

Colton, M. & Williams, M., (Eds) (1997) *The World of Foster Care: An International Sourcebook on Foster Family Care Systems*, Arena, Aldershot, UK 304 pp

This book examines the place of foster care in the child welfare system in twenty one countries across the five continents. Each contribution is written by a local person involved in foster care, which enhances the perspectives offered.

The individual chapters about each country are written to a standard format, and covers topics such as jurisdiction, history and origins of foster care, administration and organisation of systems, profile of the children in care and the care providers, major trends and issues in foster care and ongoing research in the area. However the format laid down by the editors was not adhered to strictly by all contributors, some of whom adapted it to reflect the place of foster care in their respective countries. It is perhaps the omission of information within individual chapters which gives the reader greater awareness of the stage of development of foster care systems.

The application of the format by individual contributors also points to the major difference in interpretation as to what constitutes 'foster care'. This point is elaborated further in the concluding chapter, where the editors summarise the major themes emerging in the book. They categorise the distinctions used by the various contributors as to what constitutes 'foster care' as

- (1) foster care by relatives,
- (2) foster care mediated through a formal authority,
- (3) foster care organised and provided privately, and
- (4) duration of placement.

The editors draw these distinctions in their attempt to examine the place of foster care in individual countries, and to propose a working definition of foster care. Their proposed definition attempts to incorporate the distinctions as far as possible, and is

'care provided in the carers' home, on a temporary or permanent basis, through the mediation of a recognised authority, by specific carers, who may be relatives or not, to a child (differently defined in different countries) who may or may not be officially resident with them'. (p.292)

This definition is proposed to reflect the evolving nature of alternative care services in the individual countries, and the different assumptions/ principles on which the systems are based. This definition is useful, as it reinforces the ways in which child welfare systems must strive to meet the diversity of the contexts in which they operate, rather than striving for a universal model which fails to take account of local and individual conditions and needs. It seeks to distinguish foster care (temporary) from adoption (permanent) but falls short of suggesting it only as 'family care' rather than institutional care, as foster care incorporates such care in a number of countries.

Different interpretations of what constitutes foster care serves to remind the reader of the importance of seeing alternative care options as reflecting diverse political, ideological, legislative and cultural influences/ realities. The dangers of pitching one child care option against another are only too evident, with the resultant dangers of privileging other priorities over the needs of children.

The authors also draw attention to common issues in foster care systems in the different countries. These include the challenge with designing, establishing, operating and evaluating systems for children in need of alternative care. They also draw specific attention to the recruitment of foster carers, the status of foster care, and support and services required by foster carers as key issues which will undoubtedly influence the place of foster care in child welfare systems into the next century. Yet despite the similarity of issues, the reader is struck by the disparity between individual countries, especially in the constraints facing practitioners, administrators and policy makers as they attempt to meet the needs of children and families, due to their relative economic standing in the world.

This book highlights the importance of diversity, openness to change, and the need to be flexible in the provision of services for children who require alternative care. It also challenges the reader to examine the assumptions and principles on which child care systems are based.

This is a timely book. Its publication goes some way to meeting the need for a reference book on the provision of foster care. It will be found useful by practitioners, administrators, policy makers, academics and foster carers, interested in examining the trends and developments of this care option in different countries. The book would have been enhanced by the provision of a summary table of the distinctions and themes identified in the summary chapter. This would have enhanced its use as a reference book. It is the stated intention of the authors to use a similar format for further editions of this book, in which countries not covered in this edition would be included. This proposal is to be welcomed, especially if accompanied by a more thorough analysis of the differences and similarities in alternative care systems.

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